

October 6, 1992

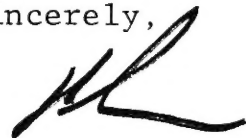
Dear Martha:

Thanks to all of you for a very enjoyable day. I liked both parts of it equally.

I'm enclosing a copy of my acceptance speech--it was either you or Hope who asked if the Society might have a copy.

The speech will be published in an abridged form in the New York Times, on the Op-Ed page, on this coming Saturday. If you want to publish it in the Society's publication, you are welcome too, after Saturday. Please let me know if you have any such plans. And thanks for helping out the BBC. They apparently plan to feature yesterday's events in the program they're making, which should be transmitted in the U.S. next March or April.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'PR' or 'Philip Roth' in a stylized, cursive script.

Philip Roth

The person who should, of course, be standing here to receive an award of honor from the New Jersey Historical Society is not the author of Patrimony but the subject of Patrimony, my father, Herman Roth, whose tenure as a resident New Jerseyman did not end like mine after less than two decades but extended without interruption from his birth in Newark's Central Ward in 1901 to his death in an Elizabeth hospital eighty-eight years later and who, for nearly half his long life, sold life insurance here, beginning in the thirties as an agent in Newark and continuing in the forties, fifties, and sixties as a manager in Union City, Belleville, and finally just outside Camden, down in Maple Shade, where he retired from the Metropolitan Life at the age of sixty-three. Working--as a life insurance salesman did then--as intimately as a family doctor or a social worker with New Jerseyans of every social class and ethnic category, in north Jersey and in south Jersey, talking for nearly forty years to thousands and thousands of families here about life-and-death matters in the most practical human terms, he came to possess a rich familiarity with the workaday existence of the citizens of this state that far exceeds my own and one for which I, as a realistic novelist native to this region, could only envy him profoundly. I would not hesitate to place his encyclopedic knowledge of prewar Newark alongside James Joyce's overbrimming sense of the Dublin whose life he renders with such sensuous precision in Ulysses.

Alas, it's the insurance man and not the novelist who came to know palpably the social history of Newark, New Jersey's largest

and, during the decades my father was employed there, its liveliest and most productive city, to know it not just neighborhood by neighborhood, not even just block by block and house by house and flat by flat, but hallway by hallway, stairwell by stairwell, furnace room by furnace room, kitchen by kitchen. It's he and not I who palpably knew the human history, the ongoing story of its population, and if he didn't know it in every last particular, then--at least back in the years when all day long and most evenings he was out with his large black Metropolitan ledger collecting premiums, sometimes as little as three cents a week, on the policies he'd sold--he knew it birth by birth and death by death, illness by illness, loss by loss, catastrophe by catastrophe. It was he and not I who, by virtue of his occupation, became something of an amateur urbanologist in the city of Newark, an anthropologist-without-portfolio from one end of the state to the other, and for all these reasons I should like, if you will permit me, to accept this award in his name.

Between 1870 and 1910, into a prosperous manufacturing city of 100,000--a population largely of English-speaking ancestry--a quarter of a million immigrants came to settle, Italians, Irish, Germans, Slavs, and Jews, some 40,000 Jews from Eastern Europe. Among them were my penniless young grandparents, Sender and Bertha Roth. My father was their firstborn American child, the middle child of seven, six boys and a girl, and very much the man in the middle for life. To negotiate from the middle, between the demands of the past, as embodied in the customs and values of his Yiddish-

speaking parents, and the demands of the future, as articulated by his American-shaped children, became not only his task but the task of that entire generation born more or less with the new century in a new world, a generation of which only a handful still survive.

In a sense every American generation is a middle generation negotiating between powerful cultural allegiances that seem natural because they are given and the requirements of a drastically transforming society. The struggle to negotiate from the middle, to be true to one's earliest allegiances while at the same time releasing one's children into a society demanding, promising, menacing in a wholly new and uncertain way is perhaps the quintessential American cultural task. But I don't think that, until perhaps the present moment, any generation has experienced the conflicts inherent in this struggle more forcefully than did the generation born to those newly arrived immigrant parents before the First World War.

Assimilation is much too weak a word, with too many connotations of deference and passive submission, to describe this process of negotiation, at least as it was conducted by my father and his ilk. Their engagement with the seemingly impervious American facts was much more robust than that; it was a two-way engagement, far more of an interchange than may have been apparent right off. As a result, it produced an amalgamation of values and traits that constituted nothing less than the invention of a new American type, the citizen with multiple allegiances, a fusion of allegiances admittedly far from flawless, not without its problems

and painful points of friction, but one that yielded, at its best, vitality, a dense and lively matrix of feeling and response.

The generation I'm talking about was largely unschooled and undereducated. During those years at the turn of the century when, living in Newark, there were two and a half times as many new immigrants as there were native Newarkers, seventy percent of Newark's schoolchildren--and two-thirds of all Newark schoolchildren were then the offspring of immigrants--didn't make it past the fifth grade. My father was one of the elite who got as far as the eighth grade before leaving school forever to go to work. In contrast to the experience of their offspring--to that of my generation--their Americanization took place not predominantly in the classroom but in the workplace. On the job is where their minds were molded and where, before the tyranny of TV beset America, they gathered their knowledge of the world and its possibilities.

The place of employment--the brewery, the tannery, the shipyards, the factory floor, the produce market, the building site, the dry-goods stall--was not necessarily the best place imaginable to disabuse one of one's prejudices, to enlarge one's sympathies, or to foster skills for the construction of vitalizing new cultural patterns to replace those that seemed, all at once, pointless and crippling. But this is nonetheless where the construction began, unheard of new American identities created not by schools, teachers, and textbooks, not, most certainly, by tendentious programs in ethnic studies, but spontaneously by the

rough-and-tumble city's realities, identities forged on the job in more senses than one.

The man or woman in the middle takes blows from both sides. First these children of the immigrant generation were inferior to the natives, then they were, of course, inferior to their own children. How to transcend this cultural inferiority? Why, through the children--through us. By virtue of that cultural elixir known as "a good education," provided with and protected by diplomas and degrees, we would carry through for them to its completion the de-shaming process of Americanization. What began when my rabbinically trained grandfather went to work at the tail end of the nineteenth century in a Newark hat factory ended when I received a master's degree in English literature at the University of Chicago virtually smack in the middle of the twentieth century. In three generations, in just under sixty years, in really no time at all, we had done it--for better or worse, we were hardly anything like what we once unquestioningly had been. The one strong remaining connection to the family's everyday life in the last century, extending beyond the American school, beyond the American workplace, was to Grandma's kitchen and the old folk cuisine, typically the evocative link to the vanished past for Americans Americanized as successfully as we were.

I hope these few hundred words explain to you why I'd like, if I may, to receive this award in behalf of my late father. During his eighty-eight years as man in the middle here, he enacted the consolidating struggle that defined the lives of that all-but-

extinct generation of Jews, Germans, Italians, Irish, and Slavs whose family tenure in America is just about coming up to one hundred years. He is a far more deserving recipient than I.

--Philip Roth  
October 5, 1992

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip Roth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "P" and "R".

Copyright Philip Roth 1992.